

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 22 March 2021

Report Title: Children's Services' Response to COVID-19

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Kathryn Flavell, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families

Senior Officer: Ged Rowney, Director of Children's Services

1. Report summary

- 1.1. This report provides a summary of the work of Children's Services in response to the current national and international public health emergency on Covid-19.
- 1.2. These are unprecedented times for the Council, and for our children, young people and families. We have many challenges ahead. Covid-19 is, and will continue to have, a significant impact on our children, young people and families.

2. Recommendation/s

- 2.1 Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note:
 - The progress to date,
 - The issues outlined in this report,
 - The impact of the pandemic on children and young people.

3. Reasons for Recommendation/s

- 3.1. To enable members to scrutinise arrangements for children and young people to ensure we have the right support in place to help children

achieve the best outcomes. To put on public record a summary of our response to date and to explain the ongoing pressures due to Covid-19.

4. Other Options Considered

4.1. Not applicable.

5. Children's Services' Response to COVID-19

Children's Services

5.1 We know that for some vulnerable children and young people, attending education or an early years setting increases their safety. At the start of school closedown to all pupils in January, we assessed all the children and young people known to our services and determined which would be safer by attending education or a setting. We developed an individual plan for each child who was not attending to mitigate this risk and to encourage them to attend. We are continuing to monitor the children who are not attending to ensure effective support is in place. Bi-weekly safeguarding partnership meetings continue to take place, and vulnerable children who are not in education continue to be a priority for the partnership. There is a shared partnership response to safeguarding all children, especially as some vulnerable children and young people may be less visible at this time.

5.2 Cheshire East has been asked to speak at an LGA conference on how we have mitigated the risk to babies and children under two throughout the pandemic, which is recognition of our work in this area.

Children's Social Care

5.3 *Children's Social Care* – We are continuing to see increased complexity in demand to domestic abuse services. Frontline workers have received vaccinations, and foster carers are now eligible to receive a vaccine and we are currently contacting them to make them aware of their eligibility.

5.4 Rapid progress has been made in permanency planning for children, and our cohort of cared for children is reducing. We have now achieved 23 adoptions this year.

Prevention and Early Help

- 5.5 Child Health Hubs – a joint venture with the NHS to enable families to access medical clinics and support in a community setting rather than needing to attend a hospital – are now running from two of our Children's Centres. The Jaundice Baby Clinic and Unsettled Infant Clinic are running from Monks Coppenhall, the Child Phlebotomy Clinic is running from Broken Cross. We have had positive feedback from parents on these clinics, and we put in a proposal bid to Nesta to be a centre of excellence for early years provision based on our work around Child Health Hubs and integration with the NHS.
- 5.6 A new mental health training pilot is taking place for Prevention staff to support practitioners working with children, young people and parents and carers who are experiencing mental health issues, particularly as the challenges of the pandemic have had an impact on residents' mental health and wellbeing.
- 5.7 Joint youth patrols between the Youth Support Service and PCSOs have been taking place during lockdown to disrupt young people from mixing in groups.
- 5.8 Over 21,500 vouchers have been distributed to families and young adults in need through the Winter Grant Scheme since the beginning of December. The grant is to offer practical support in the form of food and utilities payments. This has included provision of food vouchers for families eligible for free school meals over the Christmas period and February half term. In January, the scheme was extended to include support for vulnerable families to replace or access white goods. The scheme will continue until the end of March. A referral process is in place for professionals to refer families who need this support which is working well.

Education and Skills

- 5.9 Attendance at Cheshire East schools has now stabilised (over 7,800 pupils were attending as at 8 February), and we are confident that the right children are in school, however we continue to monitor attendance on a daily basis.
- 5.10 The Prime Minister set out the 'roadmap' for the easing of restrictions on Monday 22 February, and confirmed during this announcement that all students would return to schools and colleges on 8 March. Planning is taking place to ensure we are ready to support schools with reopening.

- 5.11 Schools and colleges across Cheshire East are continuing to carry out Lateral Flow Tests on their staff twice a week. Staff within our Special Schools and those working on a one to one basis with clinically vulnerable children have had Covid vaccines as a significant number of children and young people they work with are at increased risk from the virus. Positive Covid cases within schools had reduced before half term. Media messages were shared over half term to encourage people to stay safe and stick to the rules to support schools to open safely after half term to vulnerable pupils and children of keyworkers and to enable Cheshire East schools to open safely from 8 March.
- 5.12 The Department for Education (DfE) have asked us to share our training package for schools on supporting children's mental health and wellbeing on return to education as an example of good practice.
- 5.13 We are piloting a programme of support for parents to support children with phonics and reading at home and this has been well received to date.

6.0 Implications of the Recommendations

6.1 Legal Implications

- 6.1.1 New legislation has been enacted and guidance has been released in relation to coronavirus.
- 6.1.2 We have liaised with our Legal Services colleagues throughout the pandemic, to assist with and support our understanding and implementation of all legislation and guidance that affects our services to children and families, and will continue to do so as we progress.

6.2 Financial Implications

- 6.2.1 We are seeing the expected rise in demand to Children's Services as a result of Covid-19 which will increase costs to the Council.

6.3 Equality Implications

- 6.3.1 Care leavers are especially vulnerable and may be disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of housing and employment options as a result of Covid-19. They are also more likely to be living alone so have been at risk of being socially isolated during increased restrictions.

- 6.3.2 We have seen an increase in mental health issues, both for children and young people and parents and carers.
- 6.3.3 Some people we work with are at higher risk from Covid-19, for example pregnant women, people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, and those with underlying health conditions such as some of our children with special educational needs and disabilities.
- 6.3.4 Some children with additional needs, for example those with autism, could find the change in routine at school and at home particularly challenging and may need additional support to help them through the changes.

6.4 Human Resources Implications

- 6.4.1 There have been HR implications to staff working in different ways. HR and Public Health have been supportive of officers in ensuring that robust risk assessments are in place and available to staff in undertaking their duties, for example in carrying out face to face visits to families.
- 6.4.2 Staff have shown enormous flexibility and resilience. Families have been very positive about our new offer and virtual contact with them, and there will some ways of working we will continue with in the long term.
- 6.4.3 We are conscious of the sustained emergency response that has been required by our staff, and the impact this has, and we are continuing to remind staff that they need to prioritise their wellbeing in order to maintain their resilience.

6.5 Risk Management Implications

- 6.5.1 We have developed a Children and Families Covid-19 risk register. The Children and Families Leadership team are continuing to meet on a regular basis to share information and ensure there is a joint approach to our response and risks are anticipated and mitigated.

6.6 Rural Communities Implications

- 6.6.1 There are no direct rural communities' implications of this report.

6.7 Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children

6.7.1 The contents of this report have outlined the implications for our children and young people.

6.8 Public Health Implications

6.8.1 Covid-19 is a global pandemic and public health emergency. Public Health advice has been sought to ensure Children's Services are complying with Public Health guidelines and are providing safe services for families and our staff.

6.9 Climate Change Implications

6.9.1 The increase in people working from home, and reduced travel, has had a positive impact on climate change.

7 Ward Members Affected

7.1 All members.

8 Consultation & Engagement

8.1 Our Youth Council has continued to meet (virtually), and we continue to consult with the Parent Carer Forum and other groups. Feedback from families and partners on our support during Covid-19 has overall been very positive.

9 Access to Information

9.1 None.

10 Contact Information

10.1 Any questions relating to this report should be directed to the following officer:

Name: Ged Rowney
Job Title: Director of Children's Services
Email: Ged.Rowney@cheshireeast.gov.uk